



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Department of Corrections Introduces Virtual Reality Technology to Augment Programming for Incarcerated Parents and Their Children

Pittsburgh, PA -- Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) Acting Secretary George Little was joined by Anna Hollis, executive director of Amachi Pittsburgh to announce an innovative virtual reality (VR) pilot program that leverages technology and community partnerships to promote healthy relationships and engagement between incarcerated parents and their children.

The first of its kind collaboration between the DOC and Wrap Technologies builds on the existing InsideOut Dads and Parenting Inside Out programs, which are designed to improve communication skills, facilitate the showing and handling of feelings, and introduce effective discipline techniques. With the introduction of VR immersion, participants learn and practice healthy parenting skills in a 360-degree environment. Each VR interaction is guided by a lesson plan and managed by DOC staff, who have the ability to adapt and customize the situations in real time.

“The overwhelming majority of incarcerated parents will return to their families and communities at the conclusion of their prison sentence, and the DOC is committed to setting them up for success,” said Acting Secretary Little. “Practice makes perfect, and we hope role playing with the assistance of virtual avatars will help parents and children see beyond facility walls and build stronger families and safer communities.”

Children do not have to travel to a DOC facility to participate. Community providers Amachi Pittsburgh and Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) in Philadelphia facilitate the virtual reality visits for participating children and offer support services to their families.

“Our team is thrilled to partner with the PA Department of Corrections and Wrap to provide VR experiences for our youth and parents,” said Anna Hollis, executive director of Amachi Pittsburgh. “VR is a new, innovative way for us to pique interest, attract new participants and spark learning, creativity and imagination.”

“In our work with incarcerated individuals, we know that it is extremely important to have family support, including engagement with children,” said Laurie A. Corbin, PHMC managing director for community engagement. “We hope the parent and child will have a fun and educational experience which will provide them with happy memories despite their physical separation from each other.”

Researchers from the Pennsylvania State University have been tapped as the evaluators for the pilot program.

“We are excited to work alongside the DOC and community partners to evaluate this new and innovative program. We hope the results will illuminate more ways for incarcerated parents and their children to enjoy learning together,” said Sara Brennen with the Penn State Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center and the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy in the College of Education.

Complete funding for the VR initiative comes from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Programs. The InsideOut Dads program is available at each of the DOC’s male facilities. The VR component has been introduced at SCI Phoenix, SCI Fayette, and SCI Frackville. VR is also available at SCI Muncy, a female facility, building on a similar Parenting Inside Out program.

Incarcerated parents must be housed in general population, be within three years of their minimum date, and not be convicted of crimes involving children to be eligible to participate in the VR experiences.

For more information on the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and the InsideOut Dads and Parenting Inside Out programs, visit cor.pa.gov.

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